

To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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GOD, MAN, AND THE LAND

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In the Bible we read, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." (Gen. 1:1) This act of God immediately makes the earth different from anything which we have made. The earth is the work of God's hands and therefore it is divine; if divine, then holy. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork." (Ps. 19:1) That is why men speak of the holy earth. It is holy because it is God's earth and because he made it. The psalmist says, "The earth is the Lord's." (Ps. 24:1) Now, as the earth is God's earth not only is it holy but it is good, for God is good. "And God saw everything which he had made, and, behold, it was very good." (Gen. 1:31)

"And God said, Let us make man." (Gen. 1:26) "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." (Gen. 1:27-28) "And the Lord God planted a garden." (Gen. 2:8) "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden. . . to dress it and to keep it." (Gen. 2:15)

This was man's first position. He was husbandman in the garden of the Lord and a steward of all the mighty works of God. The fish, the fowl, the animals, and the plants were all put in his hand. He was to have control over them but not to own them. He was to dress and to keep the garden and to govern all living creatures.

Here was a very real and sacred partnership between God -- the life-giver and provider -- and man -- the guardian and husbandman. This same partnership between God and the farmer still exists, although frequently it is not well

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understood. It is still God who provides the life and gives the increase and man who controls and labors.

It is true that much of the early vision of that partnership has been lost and many now grope for the truth. Nevertheless the relationship is still there. In many strange ways we see man in almost every land expressing his dependence upon God, the creator and provider. We see it in the worship of "Ala," the earth goddess of this region. We see it in the Thanksgiving services of the Christian Church. Almost everywhere there are ceremonies which recognize God as supreme in his world and man entirely dependent upon him.

Man has been promised that by the sweat of his brow he shall eat bread. But as Ruskin, the philosopher, points out, "It may be proved with certainty that God intends no man to live in this world without working, but it seems to me no less evident that he intends every man to be made happy in his work. It is written, 'In the sweat of thy brow,' but it was never written, 'By the breaking of thine heart,' thou shalt eat bread."

GREED AND IGNORANCE

Much ignorance and superstition have crept into the work of caring for God's garden and many common practices are a sin against God, the owner. Hosea cries out, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." (Hos. 4:6) A well-known writer says, "Nature, which is the vesture of God and reveals him to the wise, hides him from the foolish." Many husbandmen today are being destroyed through lack of knowledge. They no longer see the earth as the handiwork of God.

What great sin or what deep ignorance have so destroyed the man who was made in God's image and taken into partnership with him? "He that tilleth his land shall be satisfied with bread." (Prov. 12:11) "A land which the Lord thy God careth for: the eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year." (Deut. 11:12) What has caused such a change that the husbandman is often ignorant, hungry, and distressed? Has he in some way violated his partnership agreement?

"If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; then will I give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. And your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing time: and ye shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely." (Lev. 26:3-5)

There is the secret! "If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them." That is the condition upon which the prosperity of the husbandman must rest. There must be obedience to the will of God and keeping of his laws which govern his earth. But through ignorance, carelessness, pride, and greed the laws of the earth have been violated and throughout the world man is now reaping the reward of his sin. Vast areas of once fertile farm lands are now eroded, ruined, and out of production. Huge forests have been cut and burned and no longer exist. Fish have been destroyed, by the poisonous discharge from factories. The sins of ignorance, carelessness, greed, and destruction -- all of them violations of the laws of God in the use of his holy earth abound on every hand. From them comes the present-day problem of the land -- unjust power and profits to some, hunger and despair to others, while the earth is ravished and plundered.

THE CHURCH AND THE LAND

This problem of the use of land is a problem of the Church for it is a matter of the relationship between man and his Maker. The feeding of the race at the present time and the handing on to future generations of an earth unspoiled and capable of supporting them are a God-given duty and a sacred and solemn responsibility. What is to be the attitude of the Church to this tremendous obligation? What is to be the duty of every individual believer?

The cultivation of the soil and the production of a crop is the blending of forces human and divine. Paul may plant and Apollos may water, but it is God alone who gives the increase. Man, the cultivator, undoubtedly has a very definite part to play in the use of the land -- a part that carries with it great responsibility, for the cultivator can conserve the fertility of the soil or he can quickly destroy it. The guarding of soil fertility is a wise and sound procedure from a purely selfish and economic point of view alone. It is practiced by many farmers who make no profession whatever of Christianity. How much more then should the Christian farmer seek to preserve the richness of his land when, apart from his own gain, there rests in it a duty to his God?

But alas, ignorance stalks through the land like a lion seeking whom he may devour. Many farmers, members of a church, who seek to live uprightly before men and to obey their God actually deny their God and break his laws by destroying his holy earth. Needless burning and improper cultivation, which destroy the forests and cause the land to wash away, are terrible sins, the results of which are no less serious when committed in ignorance. Unfortunately, in this connection we must charge church congregations and schools with often being even greater sinners than their non-Christian brethren. For they frequently obtain new station sites in valuable bushland and, in their zeal, immediately fell every tree and clear every bit of grass and leave the soil bare and exposed to sun and rain. The campaign among our churches and schools to plant grass, to overcome erosion, and to beautify their compounds is very encouraging. But there are still some serious offenders and it is to them these words are specially directed.

Each one of us, clergy and layman alike, needs to see the earth as being divinely created, subject to the laws of God, entrusted to man, the food store of the race, capable of keeping its richness, but very easily destroyed. Every one who touches the land should realize that he is on holy ground and that sin against the earth most certainly will be judged. Even though these sins be committed in ignorance, the Lord will not hold man guiltless. The Christian should see in this a double responsibility for both material and spiritual things. He should therefore always be an example to his neighbors as he works upon his farm, knowing that, if in his labors he keeps God's laws, the life-giving power of God will work through him to replenish the earth.

A HIGH CALLING

When seen in this light, what a noble task is the occupation of the farmer. No longer is it the drudgery and unrewarded toil so often experienced. It



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becomes a conscious effort of cooperating with the eternal God in the natural processes of his world. What a challenge to work, to learn, to understand, and to find out how the power of God manifests itself in the activities of the farm! Let it never be said that office work is more honorable or more important than the work which deals with the great forces of life and growth -- the work upon which the very lives of men depend.

Many people feel that the farmer requires no more knowledge than tradition can provide, no more training than the primitive village offers. But that is the mistake which has retarded agricultural progress, that is the error which has put a veil upon the eyes of the farmer and limited his development. There is no occupation under the sun which requires more skill and more learning for its successful performance than that of being the steward of God's earth.

Mighty scholars of many nations have for many long years sought to understand and to interpret the laws governing the forces at work on the farm. Although they have made much progress and revealed many marvelous things, there is much that is still unexplained, much that waits for some sympathetic and clear mind to unlock the door and reveal the hidden secrets within. This is a challenge to the best minds, to the most clever students. Agricultural progress waits for it and depends upon it. Who will accept the challenge? Who is better fitted for the task than the man who, in his own life first of all, acknowledges the supremacy of the Creator?

The hidden secrets of the earth and the interpretation of the working of the mighty forces with which the farmer deals cannot be fully revealed by those who have no knowledge of the Creator himself. A complete understanding of these things can come only through spiritual insight and that is the vision which the Christian Church should provide. With this vision clearly in mind the Christian farmer is in a position to demonstrate to all nonbelievers that he is, in very fact, a keeper of the garden of the Lord.

This spiritual interpretation of the land and of the laws which govern it is extremely important to the whole life and working of the Christian Church in rural areas and to the lives of the people it touches. The Church, through Jesus Christ, has been commissioned to offer to all men everywhere a "good" and "full" life.

There is no way in which this can be done better among rural people than by establishing a close link between God and man in the common everyday tasks. When the things a man believes about his God are closely interwoven with the practical things he does in his everyday life, then everything takes on a different appearance and relationship. Man no longer fights against nature, he works with it. He no longer exploits the earth for excessive profits but uses it as a God-given provision for developing a full and satisfying life. No more does he wantonly ravish the earth but thoughtfully conserves it for those who follow him. Here is a true Christian conception of man in his relationship to God and his earth. What a solemn demand it makes upon us, but what a splendid opportunity to present the Christian faith in all its fullness to those who dwell in rural areas and live their lives upon the land.